

Attitudes harden towards the lot of a working mother ^[1]

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Australians have become more conservative in their views on key gender issues since the 1990s, particularly on the role of working mothers, a study shows.

People are much less inclined to believe a working mother can be as good a mother as one who stays at home full-time, for example. And they are more likely to think it better for the family if the husband is the main breadwinner and the wife has chief responsibility for home and children.

The study, by Janeen Baxter, professor of sociology at the University of Queensland, and colleagues, shows the trend towards more liberal views on work and family has stalled and in some cases reversed.

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The study tracked responses to five almost identical questions on gender equality from different groups over five periods between 1986 and 2005.

It revealed men and women became increasingly egalitarian in their views until the mid '90s.

Since then support has stalled for the proposition that "ideally there should be as many women as men in important positions in government and business"; as has support for the proposition that "there should be satisfactory childcare facilities so that women can take jobs outside the home."

Increasing numbers have taken the conservative position on whether a working mother can be as good as an at-home mother, and on the superiority of the male breadwinner model. For example, 41 per cent of men endorsed the male breadwinner model in 2005 compared with 29.6 per cent in 2001. And 74 per cent of women in 2005 thought at-home mothers were better for children compared with 57 per cent in 2001.

Only one question bucked the trend - increasing numbers believed "if both husband and wife work, they should share equally in the housework and childcare".

Professor Baxter said women's movement into paid work was accepted as long as it did not challenge their role as mothers. This contradictory view may explain why women were delaying or forgoing childbirth: "If women, like men, think good mothering means full-time care of children, then it's difficult to reconcile with paid employment."

She suggested many people had "given up on the view" equality was possible due to the experience of working mothers. Part-time work meant mothers still did most of the childcare and housework. "In the absence of policies that support a reasonable work-life balance, it's been very difficult for men and women to share care and paid work equally," she said. "You can understand why women in particular might be ambivalent and questioning of some goals of the women's movement."

The Howard government's tax and social policies may also have encouraged more conservative attitudes, although a retreat from gender-equality goals was evident in other countries.

"It will be interesting to do this research after paid parental leave comes in next year," Professor Baxter said. "Will it make it more possible and therefore more desirable for men and women to share parenting and paid work more equally?"

The study found men were consistently more conservative than women. However, those born after 1980 appeared to be more conservative than the group born between 1960-1979.

"A stalled revolution? Gender role attitudes in Australia 1986-2005" will be published in the forthcoming Journal of Population Research.

- reprinted from the Sydney Morning Herald

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